

DEATH BY HAIR PRODUCT

By
Misty Simon

The shop was too quiet when I walked in Tuesday morning. We closed Sunday and Monday, but my boss, Pam, always opened early on Tuesday. “We want to be available to our clientele,” she’d say with that high nasal voice that drove me mad.

Working as a nail technician in Philadelphia was not the extent of my dreams, but it was a great place to start after beauty school two years ago. So I stayed and learned, despite Pam’s nasal voice, and put up with the rude customers. Someday I hoped to have rude customers of my own. I wanted to run a high-class salon one day and figured if I stayed here at Pampered by Pam long enough, I’d eventually learn all the things I shouldn’t do and be a better businesswoman and boss for it.

When I’d dug my key out of the big bag I tried to pass off as a purse, I realized how long it had been since I’d used the little gold key and how weird it was to be the first one there on a Tuesday. And now, under the glare of the fluorescent lights, the silence was eerie.

I set out fresh towels at the shampoo bowls, turned the lights on in the back and turned on the register. Checking over the appointment book, I saw we were in for a moderately busy day. My first appointment was set for ten, so I arranged all my tools on the flat white table before me for the new set of tips the client had requested. The bell over the door rang with a quick tinkle, taking me out of my thoughts and putting me to work.

Three manicures, one horrendous pedicure and two fills later, I was ready for a break. Pam had never shown up and despite the seven messages I’d left her on her home phone, hadn’t called me back, either. I finally decided to try her “never call me at this number” cell phone and the strangest thing happened. A ringing sounded somewhere in the shop at opposite times as the ringing in my ear. Ring, in my ear. Ring, ring, in the shop. Her voicemail kicked in and I was a baffled. I’d never actually used this number, but I did know Pam never let it go to voicemail. She’d walk away from a client under the faucet without a backward glance if that cell phone rang.

Very weird. I got a chill as I dialed the same number and the dual ringing started again. This time I followed the noise through the small shop and found myself in front of a locked closet. No one ever used this closet. It was full of samples, if I remembered correctly, and Pam was against samples. She was afraid people wouldn’t buy the product at our store before they left.

I ran into Pam's box sized office and searched frantically for a key to the lock on the closet door. Yanking out drawers and dropping them on the floor, I finally found a set of keys. I ran back to the closet, not sure what I would find or what I could do. The lock popped after I tried the fifth key and I swung the door open, dread pooling in my stomach. Maybe I was being too dramatic, I thought, and then Pam's body fell out of the small space in a cascade of Paul Mitchell Shampoo packets.

I spent ten minutes puking in the small bathroom in the back. Pam's head had been smashed in and the resulting mess was disgusting. I'd called the police and they said not to touch anything (which earned them hysteria from me because I'd just been touching everything all day as I worked) and to close down the shop for the day.

After washing my mouth out and gargling some Scope I found under the sink, I started making calls to reschedule the afternoon appointments and wondered how I could manage to sound normal when there was a dead body on the floor behind me. Had I gone insane?

Fortunately, today seemed to be a slow day for walk-ins and I only had to turn one person away with the excuse that there'd been a death in the family and we were closed indefinitely. I'd thought about putting a salon cape over the body (I couldn't think of it as Pam or I'd have to run to the bathroom again), but remembered the cop's instructions not to touch anything.

Finally they arrived in a blaze of revolving lights and banged on the door. I let them in after fumbling with the lock.

"Where's the body?" one of the uniforms asked. I pointed to the back of the salon and collapsed into a lift chair.

Another man, not in uniform, sat down at the next station and pulled out a flip. "You found her?" he asked, adjusting the knife pleat in his slacks.

"Yes."

"Any idea who would do this?"

"No."

"Name and address?"

"Bernie Styles," I said and rattled off my address. I wanted to fidget in the cushioned chair, but thought it might make me look guilty and I had enough not going for me because I found Pa... the body.

Several questions and one-word answers later, Detective Marley, according to his business card, left with a warning not to leave town. And I started to panic as the truth of my situation really sank in. Not only had I found the body, and hence was probably the main suspect, but also, I now didn't have a job and my rent was due. I know it was selfish, but I couldn't help wondering who was going to sign

my last check and how soon could I find a new job?

Back in my cramped apartment, I checked the machine and was surprised to find a message from a raspy voice. Tony Pescatella asked that I call him back as he was part owner of Pampered and needed to speak with me about schedules and existing appointments. My internal alarm started blaring. Loudly. Part owner? Since when? Pam had always been fiercely possessive of the shop and I just couldn't see her answering to anyone. But there was still the little matter of who was signing checks now and maybe I could get some answers.

I returned the call and the same raspy voice answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Hi," I said. "This is Bernie. I'm returning your call?" I hated when I ended my sentences with that lilt up to make it a question, but today had been so bizarre, I didn't know what to expect anymore.

"Bernie, I'm so glad you called. We need to discuss some things. Can you meet me at the Adams Bar on Fourth right now?"

The voice creeped me out and I thought for a minute about just telling the guy I quit, but my bank statement caught my eye from its place on the coffee table in front of me and I remembered I needed a job if I wanted to keep a roof over my head and my balance above zero. "I can be there Mr...?"

"Please, just call me Tony."

He hung up on me without saying goodbye, which put my back up a little. I shrugged out of my black shirt and slacks—Pam's idea of a uniform—and thought I was going to be sick again when the image of her lifeless body flashed through my brain. I shoved the gross picture away and hustled down to the bar, wondering how I was going to find this Tony character.

He spotted me first.

"Hey, Bernie. Over here."

Same voice again and still creepy. I sat down on the fake leather bench across from the rotund man and watched the muted light bounce off his bald head.

"I didn't know Pam had a partner," I blurted out. Okay, not smooth. Maybe he wouldn't notice.

He laughed. "Yeah, Pam was a big fan of looking like she ran it all. But she wouldn't have gotten anywhere without me." He sat back and stretched two hairy arms over the back of his side of the booth. His uni-brow fell into V over his beady eyes. He really needed to think about a wax.

"So, what's going to happen to the shop?"

"Well now, Bernie, that's where I hope we can come to a mutually satisfying compromise. You see, I fronted all the money for the shop, but I have no idea how to run it. I was hoping you could help me out, running the daily stuff and whatever.

In exchange, I'll bump up your salary and we'll work out fine."

"I don't get it," I opened my big, fat mouth and said. Why couldn't I just go along with my good fortune and not nit-pick? "Why haven't I ever heard of you? This just seems a little strange. I mean, you come out of nowhere and move me up in management. Pam hasn't even been gone twenty-four hours. How do I know you're legitimate?"

"You know I'm legitimate because I say so."

He must have realized how threatening that sounded because he backtracked. "Look Bernie, I know this sounds weird, but I brought along a signed agreement between Pam and myself to show you I'm on the up and up. No funny stuff going on here. I'm as shook up about her death as you probably are, but I also have to think about the business. Can you understand that?"

That made more sense to me and after he showed me the agreement, I felt a smidge better. It certainly sounded like a good deal. Although, I was still leery of the guy. And what else was I going to do? More money meant a step closer to my dream. I'd just keep an eye on Tony.

A week later we were up and running again. The police said they had some leads but nothing they could share. Other than the fact that Pam was killed by multiple blows to the head with a gallon bottle of conditioner found in the closet. I'd been let back into the shop this morning and was trying to get myself oriented. I had to figure out how to make the deposits and run the computer.

It was a slow day and I interviewed two girls to help me in the shop. The first one had a dye job from the grocery store and smacked her gum the whole time she was talking. Very annoying. Fortunately, the second girl was perfect. Lana Hall would start the next day. We'd take care of the paper work later.

I stayed until eight that night looking through the deposits to get an idea of what we 'd brought in over the last three months and the figures shocked me. I mean, it was just me and Pam four days a week and one other girl who came in for Saturdays. How on earth did we pull in \$7,000 a week? I could maybe see \$4500 on a really busy week, like right before prom, but \$7000? Impossible.

So I stayed a little longer and went through the files in the locked drawers of the desk. I didn't find anything, but a niggling little something had taken up residence in my brain.

That Thursday, Tony came in, supposedly to watch how things worked and go to the bank for the deposit. He wanted to get acquainted with our procedures. It seemed a little fishy, but who was I to question him?

When he came back from the bank, he took up residence in the same chair he'd sat in all day and flipped through a magazine until it was time to close. I locked the door after the last client left and found myself alone with Tony. Lana

had gone home an hour earlier.

“You want to catch some dinner?” he asked as he finally got off the chair. A funky sucking sound emitted when his girth was lifted from it.

“I have to get home,” I said. I needed to figure out the money thing before I sat down with him again. I was feeling a little uncomfortable being alone with him and I knew the feeling wouldn’t get any better in a restaurant or another bar. While I was back in the office between a color and a cut, I had copied some of the files that looked funny to me and put them on a disk. Jake, the guy who lived next door to me was my best friend as well as an accountant and I wanted him to take a look and tell me I wasn’t crazy.

I left right after a sullen Tony and wondered if I had it in for myself. I suspected my new boss of illegal things, maybe money-laundering, I’d just taken files that weren’t technically mine from an office and turned down dinner with my boss, who could easily fire me and then I’d be out rent money again. Plus, the police still didn’t know who had murdered Pam. Crap.

When I got home, I ran over to Jake’s. I gave him the disk and sat on his thrift store couch. After a tense hour, during which I’d paced and bugged him, then made dinner and bugged him, Jake’s eyes came unglued from his laptop monitor and he slurped up some of the spaghetti before him.

“There are definitely some discrepancies here,” he said. “I’ve never been in the salon, but you’d need at least ten technicians and fourteen-hour days to bring in this kind of money. But see here,” he pointed to the screen, “the money was trickling in. A hundred dollars here and there. Then it started moving in a little faster and finally it was flooding in. Looks like money-laundering to me and not very smart laundering, either.”

“What am I going to do, Jake? I need this job, but what if someone comes in and sees our accounts and blames me because I run the shop now?”

He scratched his goatee. “I don’t know. But you’ve only been in charge for a day; they wouldn’t hold you accountable for that. You need to get out of there.”

“I can’t,” I wailed. “I need to pay my rent and I’m closer than ever to opening my own shop. Maybe I can talk to Tony and show him what’s going on. Maybe he has no idea this was going on and will be happy I pointed it out to him.”

Jake gave me the “yeah right” look. And I ignored him because I wanted Tony to be a good understanding guy and not on the verge of getting very angry with me.

I arrived an hour early the next day to make sure I had all my ducks in a row. I didn’t know if Tony would show, but I wasn’t taking chances.

The salon was quiet in the early hours and I turned on all the lights to lighten the gloom of the fall day. “That’s weird,” I whispered in the silence. The door to the office was closed and I knew I’d left it open yesterday. I slowly made my way

to the door, my heart pounding and my mind flashing with visions of Pam's lifeless body.

I carefully turned the knob and gather all my courage to push the door open. The office was in shambles. Papers littered every surface and every picture was torn off the wall. Who on earth had been here and what were they looking for? Did they find it?

I used the phone to make my second call to the police in two weeks and sat trembling on one of the salon chairs as I waited. My brain churned and turned, trying to right things in my head. What had changed to make all these horrible things happen? A small piece of information I had not paid attention to at the time came barreling to the forefront of my mind. The women's bathroom had a new filing cabinet. I remembered leaning on it when I was in between bouts of puking on the day I'd found Pam.

I jumped out of my chair. Had the person responsible for the mess in the office known about the filing cabinet? There was only one way to find out. I grabbed a pair of gloves used for coloring and ran to the bathroom. The door was locked. I used my keys to open the lock. The filing cabinet was right where I remembered it and it was locked, too. It didn't look like anyone had touched it in weeks. A fine layer of dust had settled on the gunmetal gray surface.

"Okay," I told myself. "The police will be here soon, so get moving." My hand shook and I dropped the keys twice before I managed to find the right one.

The top drawer slid open and was empty except for a manila envelope. Not thinking about the police, I ripped it open and poured the contents into my gloved hand. A small key and a letter slid out. My eyes skimmed the letter. It was from Pam, addressed to me and told me what the key was for: a safe deposit box at the bank around the corner.

I was chomping at the bit to find out what was in the mysterious box, but at that moment the police showed up and the detective from last week sat down with me with some new questions.

"Anything missing, Ms. Styles?"

"Not that I know of."

"Who, besides yourself, has access to the building?"

"Just me," I said, hoping I wasn't wrong.

My mind flicked to Tony and I wondered if the safe deposit box had anything to do with him. I decided to keep the information to myself because I wanted in that box before I gave the key to the detective. I might never find out what was in there if I just handed it over without trying to find out what it led to.

So I held my tongue about the new key and the note. I'd do this on my own. I owed it to Pam since she gave me my first job. The whole money-laundering thing never struck me as something she'd do, so maybe I could clear her of that.

The detective finally left, probably no more enlightened than I was and I took off for the bank. I hadn't seen Tony yet and now I was hoping he wouldn't show. I closed the shop and left a little "back tomorrow" sign on the glass and brass door.

Stepping into the bank, I started to sweat. What if I couldn't get into the box? Was there a password? But I had nothing to fear. It seemed Pam put me down as a co-renter and a pleasant woman showed me into a room, leaving me with a tan, rectangular box.

My hands were slick. I kept my eyes closed for a minute. What did I hope to find? No time like the present to find out.

I counted to six—my favorite number—and looked. Okay, I don't know what I expected, but it surely wasn't a whole stack of papers and a disk.

After thanking the wonderful woman who helped me, I took off for my apartment. Jake was just coming home from his corporate job, so I snagged him and we ordered pizza. I was not cooking this time.

One hour and four slices of pizza later, I was shell shocked. Literally speechless by the things I'd learned from the papers I'd brought home.

"So it appears there was a will," Jake said. The police had asked and I didn't know then, but I knew now. Not only was there a will, but I was the beneficiary. Of the store as well as the secrets Pam had been keeping and the deal she'd cut with the IRS to catch the famous Tony Pescatella.

"Yeah, a will and a whole other slew of crap I'm going to have to figure out." I sighed. "What am I going to do?"

"First things first, you need to go to the lawyer at the top of the will and get things moving for you to own the store. I'd bet this Tony has no idea about the will and the IRS deal, so you need to get those things squared away first. Don't give him a leg to stand on."

"You're right. But now I'm a little scared. Is it possible Tony killed Pam because she wasn't going along with his plan anymore? Maybe he's the one who tossed the office."

"I think that's a pretty accurate assessment on both accounts. You need to stay away from him until the cops can pick him up and put him away."

"I know, I know. I just hope he doesn't come in tomorrow. I can't close Pampered again." I rested my head on the top of the couch and sighed, again. I'd be much happier when this was all finished.

I placed a call to the IRS about the evidence from the safe deposit box and got that ball rolling, then called the cops who came out and took a look at the letter from Pam explaining how she got mixed up with Tony when she was working as a dancer at a topless bar. She'd wanted a new life for herself so badly she sacrificed

her integrity and her freedom. Her conscience finally got the best of her when Tony started flooding her shop with money and she'd gone directly to the IRS hoping to get help and a way out. But she hadn't been quick enough.

Lana and I did a brisk business during the day and I made sure neither of us was ever in the store alone. She stayed later than usual to keep me company while I finished up. I'd only told her enough to make her cautious. I didn't want her to quit.

Neither of us wanted to leave alone, so we'd go do the bank deposit together and then I'd drop her off at her car and see her the next day, when the cops would start surveillance on the shop. Some kind of drug bust was going down tonight and so they were shorthanded. No one came out and told me this, but you get to be a good listener when you work in a salon and I had a vested interest in this whole sordid mess.

Lana and I walked to my sedan and got in. I started the engine and shifted into drive before I noticed a prickly sensation on the back of my neck, like someone was watching me. I tried to see if Lana felt the same sensation, but she was singing along with the radio in an off-key voice, one that would make dogs howl, and not paying attention. She'd told me singing helped her with stress, but it was not helping my stress level.

I made a left turn out of the parking lot and looked into the rearview mirror—a habit I'd picked up when learning to drive with my dad. And the scariest thing showed up in that little rectangle.

Tony.

Why, oh why, didn't I have a cell phone? Did Lana have one? Could I somehow get her attention and let her know we were in trouble? She was still wailing away to Tori Amos, playing the air piano. Oh God.

For an instant, I thought about slamming on the brakes. Maybe he'd fly forward and hit the windshield, injuring himself. But life wasn't that simple. And my luck didn't seem to be running in the right direction.

Tony's eyes glinted in the headlights of an oncoming car and he caught me staring at him. I almost ran off the road. My hands were sweating. My heart pounded to beat the band. And still Lana sang, now to Erasure.

Decision time. I jerked the wheel to the right and hit the curb, bouncing Tony out of his seat and jolting Lana from her one-woman concert. She screamed as we both saw the large gun in Tony's hand.

"Pull over."

What was my line? I'd already pulled over. "Uh, okay."

Eyes shifting back and forth in the glint of more oncoming cars, he seemed to realize the stupidity of his demand and banged the back of my seat. "Don't get smart with me. You think you're so smart. Running a stupid salon isn't exactly

brain surgery, sweetheart. I could have replaced you with any number of people, you just suited my purposes. At least until today.” He paused and I drew my first breath in minutes. Then lost it again when he continued. “But I followed you yesterday and guess who I saw go into a bank and come back out with a big stack of papers?”

I assumed this was a rhetorical question and didn’t want to get hurt for saying something stupid, so I kept my mouth shut.

“I saw you, Bernie. You came out of the bank with a stack of papers. Care to share what you found?” Tony put the business end of the gun against my temple and sweat pooled at the base of my spine.

I was going to die at the pinnacle of my life. I finally had my own shop and money to run it. A great new friend and employee. And this big schmuckatelli was going to ruin it all. Why now? Why couldn’t these things happen when my life was a mess and I was at rock bottom? Life was so unfair.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Lana reach into her right pocket. From his position in the back seat, Tony couldn’t see her hand, but I hoped she was reaching for a cell phone and not a stick of gum.

“The papers you saw me with were from my mother’s estate,” I said, hoping to stall for time. Please let Lana get through to the police.

“That’s crap, Bernie, and we both know it. So what did Pam leave you? A list of my bad habits? An accounting of every bad thing she ever did for me?”

Time to drop the estate ploy and play stupid instead. “I don’t know, Tony. I haven’t had a chance to look over anything.”

“I don’t believe that. Do you think I’m stupid? I know you found the ransacked office and figured out it was me. I also know you found the key I was looking for. So what was in the box?” He emphasized each sentence with a jab of the gun. If I hadn’t already had a headache, one would be brewing now.

“So tell me. Now.”

I had nothing to lose and some more time to kill (Oh God, wrong choice of word) before the police would hopefully pull up. Please let the police pull up. Soon. “I found a detailed list of all the money you’ve been depositing and laundering through Pampered. Pam made a deal with the IRS to turn you in and documented that, too.”

“And what did you do with the information?” he asked in the raspy voice that frightened me.

I hoped this would not be the last sentence out of my mouth. “I didn’t do anything with it.”

“Liar!” he screamed, just as a shot burst my rear passenger window.

The last thing I thought before I passed out was that I hoped the police department knew they’d be paying for a new window.

Standing in my bustling salon, I watched the maintenance men for the complex put up my new sign. The police had only wounded Tony and so I would have to testify against him when his trial started next month. Pampered by Pam wasn't the only business he'd been laundering money through, but it was the only one whose owner had tried to stand up to him and get out from underneath his illegal thumb. He'd killed Pam when he thought she'd gone to the police about him and tried to con me into being a part of his laundering ring because he hadn't known about the will.

The big sign was neon pink with a perfectly coiffed woman in profile blowing a kiss from beautifully manicured hands. It said simply "Styles" and was way classy. Jake had set me up with a graphic designer friend of his to make the sign. I loved the way it turned out.

Lana stood next me, arms crossed and head cocked to the side. Thankfully, she'd decided to stay, even after the whole Tony thing. She'd said she'd come from a small town in Idaho where nothing ever happened. That night was the most exciting of her life, despite how scared she was, and she wasn't leaving my side because she wasn't going to miss out on any other fun I got myself into.

Oh, and we gave out samples at every opportunity now. The money was coming in hand over fist for ladies and men to have their hair cut or their nails done by the women who faced down a gunman on the side of the road. And people always bought product before they left, but I still gave out samples because I'd decided that was one way to keep the customers from being rude. Offer them something for free and sure enough they left with a smile on their face. And came back again and again.

Life was looking very good. Maybe now I could concentrate on my next goal and find a man. Hold the drama, please.